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WELCOME TO THE HATE STATE

The Rocky Mountain state of Colorado was best-known as a winter holiday destination for the rich and sophisticated until – on the very day that the rest of America elected a liberal president in Bill Clinton – its voters endorsed an amendment to the state constitution legalising discrimination against homosexuals. RICHARD GRANT *reports from the resort town of Aspen. Photographs by* ED KASHI

Traditionally, journalists covering the celebrity ski season in Aspen, Colorado, face a straightforward task, demanding more of the liver than the intellect. By day, one waits at the foot of the manicured ski mountain for the standard glimpses of Jack Nicholson, Martina Navratilova, Don Johnson, Goldie Hawn, Donald Trump and sundry billionaires at play. Evenings are spent running up vast expenses tabs in gourmet restaurants and glamorous nightclubs in the hope of snatching a quote from John Denver or Cher or Barbra Streisand. This season, however, the Aspen gossip corps has found itself covering an angry political controversy on the future of gay rights in America.

On 3 November last year, the day of the presidential election, Colorado voters

approved an amendment to the state constitution which legalises discrimination against homosexuals. To be more precise, Amendment 2 voids existing ordinances, or by-laws, in the cities of Aspen, Boulder and Denver protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination in jobs, housing and public services. It also bans any similar anti-discrimination legislation in the future.

Amendment 2 was due to have become law last month, on 15 January, but it was stalled by a lawsuit challenging its constitutionality. It will now be up to the United States Supreme Court, the ultimate constitutional authority, to decide whether homosexuals in America have the right to be protected against discrimination. Its decision is expected towards the end of this year. If and when Amendment 2 becomes ratified into law, it will be legal in Aspen, Denver and Boulder to fire someone from their job, or evict them from their home, for no other reason than their sexual orientation.

To Colorado for Family Values (CFV), the right-wing pressure group that campaigned in favour of Amendment 2, the November vote was a triumph for its brand of conservative Christian morality. To the American liberal establishment, the vote was an unspeakable horror, demanding an immediate response. Gay and lesbian organisations, the National Organisation of Women and the *New York Times* were among those calling for an economic boycott of Colorado, with particular emphasis on the state's lucrative tourist industry.

(Left) Torchlight parade: a protest against Amendment 2, which legalises discrimination against gays in Colorado, on the opening night of Gay Ski Week in Aspen

(Top) 'The Follie Boyz': a stage show at the Club Tatou in Aspen during Gay Ski Week

(Above) Conservative morality: Will Perkins, right, with a supporter, is a car dealer from Colorado Springs whose organisation, Colorado for Family Values, masterminded Amendment 2

A bohemian crowd of artists, writers, actors, filmmakers and animators, all in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, assemble at a party in Denver. It is two months since the election, but Amendment 2 still dominates the conversation. For this small group of left-wingers, who comprise the Denver art scene, the whole affair has been a terrible shock and a hideous embarrassment. Colorado, which long enjoyed a reputation for progressiveness, is now a byword for bigotry, and is known to liberals throughout the nation as the Hate State.

Several guests feel compelled to assure me of their liberal credentials. "We're not all raging homophobes in Colorado," says Sally Watt, a painter, "Everyone I know voted against Amendment 2. I guess that's why it came as such a shock. It's easy to see, with hindsight, how it passed, but at the time it sounded so wacked-out we didn't think it had a chance."

"We were all here on election night," recalls Jennifer Kincade, an animator, "toasting Clinton's victory and gloating over the Republicans' defeat. For most of us, it was the first time we'd ever voted for a winning president and, for a while there, it was truly an enjoyable occasion. Then we get the news through that Amendment 2 has passed. It was like, wait a minute, this can't be happening...

"The election forced a lot of people in Denver to realise that we liberals live in an enclave here, surrounded by rednecks, bigots and rabid fundamentalists on all sides."

The host, a filmmaker named Allen Hill, says he has experienced a variety of emotional responses to Amendment 2. He has passed through disbelief, shock, anger, embarrassment, and has now found refuge in caustic humour. Standing in the doorway, he greets new guests with a bitter, sarcastic harangue, "Well, shit, howdy and welcome to the Hate State! We're going to drink some beers here and then go down to a gay bar and beat some fags over the head with baseball bats. Hey, c'mon Colorado, let's do it for Jesus!"

Aspen became the particular focus for the proposed economic boycott of Colorado when a Los Angeles organisation entitled the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (Glaad) called on Hollywood stars to abandon their skiing vacations at the Colorado resort town in protest. And so, for the Aspen media, the big story now is who *isn't* in town. Barbra Streisand, for example, has heeded the boycott, and made the sacrifice of skiing in Sun Valley, Idaho, instead. The Kennedy family has taken its business to Park City, Utah. The actress Whoopi Goldberg, the director Jonathan Demme and the comedian Joan Rivers have also stayed away. However, the rest of the entertainment industry has arrived as usual, giving the *New York Times* the impression that "some top entertainers care a lot about civil rights, except when it interferes with their Aspen vacation plans".

Glad rags: drag night at Aspen's Club Tatou in aid of the campaign against Amendment 2

The top entertainers in question had various explanations for their presence, most centring on the misguided nature of the boycott. Jack Nicholson pronounced it "rubbish". "This town supports human rights for all," stated Cher at a press conference. "You are lashing out at the wrong target." "Aspen needs support," added the tennis player Chris Evert. "It doesn't need a boycott."

These pro-Aspen arguments proved more compelling. Hotel reservations are 12 per cent up on last year. At the new $500-a-night Ritz-Carlton hotel, there have been no cancellations because of Amendment 2, although, according to Frank Cavella, the hotel's sales and marketing director, some people have asked, "How do I explain it so I can still come and not look bad?" The only event to be hit was Aspen's annual Gay Ski Week at the end of January, which reported 500 cancellations (from a normal attendance of 2,500), and a slightly more subdued atmosphere than normal.

The social hub of Aspen is the exclusive, members-only Caribou Club, presided over by the elegant figure of Harley Baldwin, property magnate and socialite. I found him draped across a sofa, emitting hoarse bursts of braying laughter into a telephone. Behind him, bejewelled society matrons sipped champagne from fluted glasses. "Donald's arriving tomorrow," said one, referring to Donald Trump, the property speculator. "We really must find him a suitable babysitter for Ivanka." Over at the blackjack table, George Hamilton, actor and suntanning guru, and the ageing television star Robert Wagner shuffle chips impassively. Harley hangs up, flashes a conspiratorial smile, and gestures to the chair opposite. "It seems Liza Minelli will not be joining us this year. A blow, but life at the Caribou Club continues."

Harley and the rest of the Aspen celebrity

establishment are firmly opposed to the boycott. "Boycotting Aspen is like attacking the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto because of the Nazis," he says. Like many Aspenites, he uses the example of the Aspen ski marathon to illustrate the shortcomings of the boycott. In December, the organisers of a 24-hour ski-athon raised $150,000 for Aids research, only to be told by Amfar, the American Foundation for Aids Research, that it was refusing to accept money tainted by association with Colorado. At the time of writing, the funds are frozen in a bank account.

Terry White, a spokesman for the Gay and Lesbian Community of Aspen, which also opposes the boycott, comments, "If I was [HIV] positive, or had Aids, and I thought that money might help to cure me and millions of others, do you think I'd care where it came from?"

"This is probably the most progressive town in the country, a nirvana of tolerance," says Harley Baldwin. "Aspenites voted three to one against Amendment 2. The forces of darkness must be beaten back, but to boycott Aspen seems singularly misguided. I have no real economic motive for taking this position. The Caribou Club will be a wonderful, flourishing madhouse as always. Sure I'll miss Liza – such a nice lady – I'll miss Barbra Streisand at my piano as well – but I'll survive."

Amendment 2 was spawned in Colorado Springs, a staunchly Republican military-industrial city of 280,000, which lies 70 miles due south of Denver. The Springs, as locals know it, is home to the huge, top-secret North American Aerospace Defence Command (Norad) and headquarters to 53 national Christian religious organisation. Although Colorado for Family Values has borrowed many of its concerns and tactics from the national Christian right movement, it is a local organisation, chaired by Will Perkins, a car dealer. He formed CFV in the summer of 1991, in response to an anti-discrimination ordinance proposed by gay and lesbian groups in Colorado Springs, and continues to run the operation from his office at the car showroom. He handles the press with a smooth, plausible style honed on the showroom floor.

"I can say with an absolutely clear conscience that I do not hate homosexuals," he tells me over the telephone. "I simply do not consider sexual orientation a valid basis for special protection under the law. The homosexual community is seeking minority status, and all we're saying is, let's reserve that status for the true minorities: ethnic and religious groups." When pushed, Perkins will admit that "as a Christian", he "disapproves of the homosexual lifestyle", but he is meticulous in avoiding blatantly homophobic remarks.

By law, a proposed amendment to the Colorado constitution requires a petition of 50,000 signatures to get on the ballot paper. CVF distributed most of their petition forms in churches – along with a tabloid newssheet detailing child molestation scandals, the homosexual war against "family values" and the sinister menace of gay teachers "recruiting" children in schools – and collected 85,000 names. Many of the same themes were repeated in its television commercials for the campaign. One featured a scene from a Gay Pride parade in San Francisco of a drag queen in high heels, holding a cross and writhing on the pavement, and gave a YOUR TOWN NEXT warning that gay rights would lead to similar behaviour in Colorado. Another argued that gay civil rights were "an atrocity", and that "bedroom acrobatics" were no basis for legal protection. Time and again, the campaign iterated the message that homosexuals were seeking "special rights".

'The forces of darkness must be beaten back, but to boycott Aspen seems singularly misguided. I'll miss Liza – such a nice lady – and I'll miss Barbra Streisand at my piano – but I'll survive'

Leading the fight against Amendment 2 was the Equal Protection Ordinance Coalition (Epoc), an organisation of gay and lesbian groups. Its main commercial featured a generic Mom and Pop in the suburbs with a gay adult son, objecting to the suggestion that they lacked family values. It was widely criticised as a lame response to the lurid scare tactics of CFV. "We lost the election because we allowed them to set the agenda," Sue Larson, an Epoc organiser, reflected later. "The issue was not 'special rights'. It was about them taking away our equal rights, and it was motivated by hatred."

On election day, Colorado voters faced a ballot that required their decision on a dozen or more political and judicial candidates and ten proposed amendments, including the following conundrum: "Shall there be an amendment to ... the Colorado Constitution to prohibit the State of Colorado and any of its political subdivisions from adopting or enforcing any law or policy which provides that homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation, conduct, or relationships constitutes or entitles a person to claim any minority or protected status, quota preferences, or discrimination?" Fifty-three per cent voted "yes", but many individuals have since claimed they misunderstood the wording and voted "yes" because they thought sexual orientation did entitle a person to protected status.

CFV had hired a team of lawyers from the National Legal Foundation, an evangelical Christian organisation in Virginia, to draft Amendment 2. The document is widely admired by its opponents as a masterpiece of obfuscation. Its key deceit is the phrase "quota preferences", which falsely and cunningly suggests that gays and lesbians are seeking positive discrimination – an idea perceived as unfair and un-American by the majority of the electorate.

On 4 November, the day after the election, protesters marched on the state capitol building in Denver. The march was headed by Roy Romer, the Colorado governor,

and Wellington Webb, the mayor of Denver and a well-known campaigner for gay rights. Both of them, in apparent defiance of the will of the people as expressed through the democratic process, held signs reading NO ON 2. On 12 November, the cities of Denver, Aspen and Boulder, in conjunction with several gay people, including Martina Navratilova, filed the law-suit challenging the constitutionality of Amendment 2. Shortly afterwards, the National Organisation for Women, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Association of Law Libraries became the first of many organisations to cancel conventions in Colorado.

Mayor Webb embarked on a nationwide media tour to try to head off a boycott of the state's $5-billion-a-year tourist industry during the ski season. He argued that a boycott would primarily affect Denver, Aspen and Boulder, all of them towns which had voted decisively against Amendment 2 and were committed to overturning it. He said to Arsenio Hall, a popular talk-show host and a fellow African-American, "When some of us were trying to desegregate the South, we went south. We didn't boycott the South." At the CBS television studios in New York City, the mayor was mobbed by a gang of gay men, chanting, "We're here, we're queer, we're not going to ski." He countered that nothing would give Colorado's homophobes more satisfaction.

Mayor Webb's media blitz was a miserable failure. The US Conference of Mayors cancelled its planned gathering in Colorado City, by a unanimous vote of 1,046. The city council of Austin, Texas, banned employees from travelling to Colorado on business. Los Angeles city council passed a similar travel ban, and moved to bar city contracts with Colorado firms. Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta – more than a dozen city councils in total – instituted full or partial boycotts of Colorado, and issued strong statements condemning Amendment 2. Film companies went elsewhere to shoot, businesses changed their plans to relocate to Colorado. In the first month after the election, the Colorado Chamber of Commerce estimates that Amendment 2 cost the state $10 million.

In view of the boycott, and the noisy self-righteousness of many who have joined it, it is worth examining Amendment 2 in the national context. Outside a few dozen cities and six states, it is still perfectly legal to discriminate against homosexuals in America. Indeed, Aspen, Denver and Boulder can be counted among the most progressive cities in the nation for passing anti-discrimination legislation in the first place, and voting so decisively against Amendment 2. There is an inescapable hypocrisy in someone like Mayor Victor Ashe of Knoxville, Tennessee, joining a boycott of Colorado, when the law-books of his home state consider sodomy a crime punishable by 30 days in jail. In South

Celebrity host: Harley Baldwin, who runs the Caribou Club, the social hub of Aspen

Carolina, which is also participating in the boycott, a man convicted of "the abominable crime of buggery" faces a five-year prison sentence, and may lose the right to vote. The city of Atlanta, Georgia, has instituted a travel boycott of Colorado, despite the fact that Georgia state law still regards sodomy (and oral sex) as "infamous crime(s) against nature", deserving of a one- to 20-year prison sentence. Indeed, sodomy is outlawed in 22 states. By comparison, Colorado abolished its sodomy laws in 1971.

The alarm over Amendment 2 has been inflamed by reports of increased gay-bashing incidents in the state, although the precise extent of this increase is hard to determine. The Gay and Lesbian Community Centre of Colorado held a press conference in Denver on 22 December, to announce a fourfold increase in "hate crimes" against gays and lesbians since the election. According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which is based in Washington DC, 1,600 miles from Denver, this alleged crime wave was "directly attributable to the climate of hate and fear created by the passage of Amendment 2".

The impact of the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre's figures was weakened by the fact that the centre does not distinguish between verbal and physical "bias incidents", and provides no names or dates by which reports can be checked. Sue Anderson, the centre's executive director, said that incidents over the past year had ranged from verbal harassment to five "gay-related" murders. Tom Haney, the Denver police chief, later stated that his department had no evidence of a significant increase in assaults against gays, and noted that "most or all" of the gay murders were perpetrated by other gays. Anderson refused to discuss the murders, citing confidentiality for the victims' families.

At the time of writing, there are more than 50 organisations in Denver alone promising to "Undo 2", and more appear every day. There have been many protests, even more name-calling, and a ceaseless howling for vengeance but, as yet, no consensus on the best strategy for overturning Amendment 2. The lawsuit has bought time, but in the past the Supreme Court has refused to recognise homosexuals as a legitimate minority suffering discrimination. If Amendment 2 is found to be constitutional, the only recourse left to its opponents will be to draft and campaign for a rival amendment to restore rights for gays and lesbians. In the meantime, opposition to Amendment 2 is best characterised as chaotic. •

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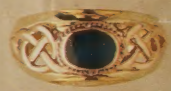
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SKIN FLICKS

Dennis Potter's long and painful struggle with a debilitating skin disease and his preoccupation with the dark side of human sexuality might suggest someone with a grim outlook on life. But, as he told MARK LAWSON, *Potter has never despaired, and his new television series, 'Lipstick On Your Collar', is his jolliest work for some years. Photograph by* MIKE ABRAHAMS

Watching the literary biographies stack up – another Trollope in the shops, the latest H G Wells, yet one more Sylvia Plath, the first Larkin, the second Greene – there is diverting sport to be had in predicting which current British writers will be the most eagerly written about in the next century. My money would be on Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis among the novelists (with a side industry in slim-volume, Bloomsbury-style group biographies of the Cape Set of Amis-McEwan-Rushdie-Barnes-Winterson) and, from the dramatists, the sombre and obsessive Harold Pinter. But young biographers looking to lay down a subject from a less obvious *cru* could do worse than Dennis Potter.

The prevailing concerns of the modern literary memoir are copulatory, medical and philosophical. And Potter's life and work offer the rare biographical triple whammy of sex, illness and religion. For the biographer as psychoanalyst, there are the demons of male sexuality which howl through his work to the extent that the bulk of his scripts have taunted the censors and he has been critically indicted of misogyny and lechery. There is also evidence – to which he seemed deliberately to lead profilers and then to shoo them away – of a ruinous sexual incident in his youth. For the biographer as doctor, there is Potter's 32-year affliction with psoriatic arthropathy, a condition in which the joints seize and the skin explodes like an epidermal volcano, leaving the patient with the texture and mobility of a boiled lobster. For the biographer as theologian, there is Potter's grim, lifelong grip on the possibility of God.

And there is more. The biographer as bitch gets the flarings of temperament: two hot-headed exits from the BBC, one from LWT and several from Kenith Trodd, his main producer. These chafings against collaboration might plausibly be presented as culminating in the fiasco of *Blackeyes* (1989), a BBC serial which Potter wrote, directed, produced and narrated, leaving himself few excuses when the critical trashing singled out the writing, direction, production and narration.

Finally, the biographer as critic might well have the unusual opportunity of tracing the career of a writer who outlived the artistic form in which he worked. Potter's dark, layered, playful work – principally represented by the six-part BBC serials *Pennies From Heaven* (1978) and *The Singing Detective* (1987) – will look increasingly a luxury in the deregulated, profit-driven world of modern broadcasting, in which the length of skirt and width of grin of ITV breakfast television presenters is reportedly a key editorial calculation.

"I was in the Sixth Form when I first saw television," he recalls, "so I saw it at the very moment when I was thinking: what am I about? This thing sitting in people's living rooms. I thought: how wonderful this could be. Now you'd have to say: how wonderful it could have been..."

A Potter biography would also be rich in those connections, so beloved of the form, between life and work. The Forties childhood (he was born in 1935) in the Forest of Dean – a curious combination of rurality and coal-mining, with its distinctive sing-song dialect ("How bist thou, butty?" being a typical greeting) – resurfaced in the vivid schoolboy drama *Blue Remembered Hills* (1979). The lush leafiness of the forest was a key motif among the memories of the shattered protagonist of *The Singing Detective*.

The writer's father and grandfather were both miners, the young Potter growing up in an unusually extended family, with three generations living in the same cottage. When he first began to give interviews in the Sixties, the author always presented his childhood as tender and protected: even now, he can weep when speaking of his "lovely, gentle" father. But someone else around the house must have been darker. In a preface to a collection of his plays, first published in 1983, Potter planted a curious clue, referring to "something foul and terrible that happened to me when I was ten years old, caught by an adult's appetites and abused out of innocence". Perhaps nobody reads introductions, or maybe it was simply too long before Cleveland and Esther Rantzen's Childline, but Potter's confession was to lie undisturbed for six years.

A fierce reader and Eleven Plus star, Potter followed national service in 1953 – a period revisited in the play *Lay Down Your Arms* (1970) and his new, six-part Channel 4 serial *Lipstick On Your Collar* – by reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Oxford. This class translation kickstarted his art. While still an undergraduate, he was interviewed for a BBC documentary on social mobility. His chippy contribution was reported by the Labour newspaper *Reynolds News* under the headline: MINER'S SON AT